When Faculty Know You're a Writing Center Consultant

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"I'm not a writing god, just a pretty good writer with an awesome job."

-- anonymous WC consultant

Writing center consultants possess an identity as trained workers who can assist clients with their writings. However, what happens in the consultants' own classes when their professors learn the consultants work in a center? Singled out as trained professionals, consultants are no longer just students, but they are not yet full authority figures, a role their professors already occupy.

I, as a director, wondered how consultants deal with being suspended between identity and power. So, in Fall 2017, I distributed an IRB-approved survey through the WCenter, receiving 136 responses,[1] primarily from consultants at four-year public (58.5%), private (26.9%), and community colleges (14.6%). Most respondees were undergraduates (80.2%), not graduates (19.8%), with one-to-three years writing center experience.

Classrooms are sites of power where an individual—such as a professor—has "the potential to influence others' or the group's behavior" (McCrosky and Richmond 178). So, I examined the survey's responses using the famous work of social psychologists John R. P. French and Bertram Raven, who argue that sources of power can be labeled as "legitimate, expert, informational, reward, referent, and coercion." Looking at the survey through this lens reveals consultants' strategies for dealing with their professors. While they never challenge faculty authority, consultants speak up about their work, defend their center, and recast the classroom situation to become better writers.

Legitimate Power

During the first class meeting, as faculty walk in, lugging textbooks, syllabi, and laptops, consultants experience a professor establishing *legitimate* power: "the assumed or initial right a person has to enforce his or her power on someone" (Golish and Olson 301). Everyone in the class respects, even acknowledges the role of the person in the front of the room. Consultants, too, are accustomed to legitimate power arising from circumstances. When they sit down with clients, they demonstrate legitimate power since, after all, they have been hired to work in the center. Though consultants have experienced their own legitimate power, the survey indicates consultants are more than willing to give "the con" to the person at the front of the classroom. Teachers are teachers; legitimate power is accepted.

Expert Power

The second source of power originates from being the *expert*; that is, faculty show they are "competent and knowledgeable in specific areas" (McCroskey and Richmond 177). Consultants, trained to conduct peer reviews, also embody expert power, so the classroom now has two experts—albeit in separate areas. Thus, authority needs to be negotiated, with faculty possibly feeling threatened by the consultants' expertise: "She [the professor] seemed uncomfortable with mentioning the center or my speaking up much in her class, almost like I would undermine her or correct her if I did these things. Bad semester." Remarkably, only 2 consultants reported their professors felt threatened. So, consultants do not see their expertise endangering the faculty's expert standing: "Professors understand I am a dedicated student, and I will do my best to perform all my assignments."

Consultants may carefully avoid undermining faculty's expert power, but they continue to take pride in being consultants. They report feeling "comfortable" or "extremely comfortable" (81.5% n = 106) letting professors know they work in the center. Yet, to avoid jeopardizing the professors' expert status, consultants are *not* likely to volunteer such information, with only 25% (n = 32) saying they would reveal their wc roles, willingly. Other consultants (20% n=26) hedge their options, saying disclosure depends on the course or on how they "read" their professors (39% n=51): "Some English professors might hesitate to recommend/respect the WC because they see us as just checking grammar (nope). I don't tell those professors where I work because they grade my papers more harshly and expect me to outperform my peers." Consultants also make sure the timing is appropriate: "My professors learn that I work in the center because they encourage students to go, and that's when I tell them I work there." Another consultant decided to disclose her work only after the professor had complimented her writing: "At that point, my being a good writer would speak well for the center."

Being discrete, though, is not always enough to maneuver through anxious moments. Consultants also

resort to techniques that respect, even comply with expert power. These classic forms of adjustment—called Behavior Alteration Techniques (BATs) (Golish and Olson 295)—are "power-based influence techniques" used by both teachers and students (Golish and Olson 295) to gain compliance from each other in a push-me, pull-me exchange. Most instructors have experienced such strategies. A student who says, "I was sick and just didn't get the writing finished" has used a non-antagonistic or "pro-social" BAT to show the student is being "honest-sincere" (Golish and Olson 297). The opposite is an "anti-social" BAT like "complaining" ("I have too much to do in other classes.") (Golish and Olson 297).

BATs are inherent to all classrooms, and consultants—still students—employ them. When, for instance, a professor inadvertently undermined their own expert power in an announcement, a consultant gently, respectfully modified the professor's power with a pro-social BAT: "I had one professor tell my classmates that they could *E-mail* me their work, and I'd help them. I had to quickly interject and say that they could make *appointments* with me, instead." Rather than disputing the professor, the consultant channeled the professor's comment to generate business for the center. As Carrie Shively Leverentz characterizes consultants, "[I]t could be said they are experts in not appearing to be experts" (54).

Faculty do not always have to be placated. In fact, they are sometimes willing to share expert power, as when they treat consultants like knowledgeable peers: "The teacher made literary references in my direction which I did not always know, but that didn't deter his jocularity." In assigning group writing projects, faculty also share expert power by tapping into the consultants' expertise: "[T]hey'll ask me in front of the whole class for tips on how to effectively give feedback, especially if we're about to do a peer review." Such power sharing, at the expert level, reflects well on centers, showing faculty are aware of the special expertise consultants have acquired.

Information Power

Information power accrues to those who possess facts someone needs to carry out a task (French and Raven). Faculty exhibit this power when, without asking the consultant first, they announce a class member works in the center. By providing this news, professors show the class they do, indeed, possess all knowledge, even about consultants enrolled in the course. Consultants defuse this awkward situation by explaining the center's services to the class: "I hope that showing how I help as a writing tutor and informing various professors and departments that there are lots of writing consultants with a science background will eventually shift professors' perspectives, and they will refer students to the Center for content, brainstorming, and drafting work, not just grammar." Not being overawed by the professors' information, consultants convert this power to the center's advantage.

Reward Power

Another classroom dynamic is the professors' providing "approval, privileges, or some other form of compensation" (Thomas), like bestowing praise and distinction. This powerful *reward* dynamic factors into faculty's treatment of consultants who like being "rewarded" as when professors approve of the consultants' class work. "No tutors want to hand in 'garbage essays'," explains a consultant. "It's not an option unless you enjoy looks of slight disappointment and disapproval." Overall, consultants are still students, seeking (and enjoying) the educational establishment's rewards.

Referent Power

Like all students, consultants are subject to a fifth classroom dynamic: *referent* power (McCroskey and Richmond 183). Here, instructors show they are "fair and concerned about students" (Thomas), like allowing sick students extra time to submit assignments. Then, classes respect them and want to please them (McCroskey and Richmond 177). Faculty exhibit such referent power when they suggest students visit the center for help. Consultants are not upset when professors use the center to establish referent power: "Whether or not my name is mentioned [as a consultant], I would also provide information about the center's hours and location to help other students. If my professor by this time did not know my status as a consultant, my input would often prompt his/her question about my working there." Once again, without being authoritative (Carino 97), consultants convert a power dynamic to the center's advantage.

Coercive Power

Faculty's treatment of consultants reflects a last dynamic: *coercive* power, which refers to the degree "to which people feel they will be punished if they do not conform to teachers' expectations" (McCroskey and Richmond 176). In classrooms, the most common form of coercive power is, of course, grading. Although most consultants (52% n=71) feel professors rarely alter grading because of the consultants' status, 40% (n=40)

express some concern: "[W]hen I wrote an assignment not to the best of my ability, it often felt as though the professor was more liberal with the red pen and made every comment possible." Feeling the coercive force of grading, some consultants also mention professors have "higher expectations" for them as writers (11% n= 14). But, once again, consultants use a power base to help their center: "My personal class work reflects on the center, and if that is not perfect, professors will not take the center as seriously and send their students for help."

Conclusion

The survey provided insight into how consultants grapple with their dual roles as a consultant-student. In fact, consultants relate so successfully to their faculty that the majority of them (78.3% n=90) report professors see them not as competitors but as serious students: "Faculty have a sense of respect for me as a student who cared enough to use my skills and interests to give back to other students." The survey also reveals why directors hired the consultants in the first place: they can deal with people in all contexts by decoding the situation, deflecting emotions, and navigating through the crashing rocks of a classroom's dynamics. The survey's results, then, mean, as a director, I can inform consultants about what to expect when consultants must manage the delicate position of being a consultant-student. And, indeed, learning the skill of negotiating sensitive, thorny moments can follow consultants beyond the center, right into their careers: "I felt that there were times where I felt prepared to assist outside the center, but I think maintaining boundaries was a skill I developed in this role [as a consultant] that is fully applicable in a professional setting after graduating."

Notes

1. Because answers overlapped, responses do not add up to 100%. Also, not all consultants answered all questions.
2. Thanks should be extended to the former peer consultant Will Allen for tabulating the numbers.

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